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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the growing dissatisfaction with language laboratories for foreign language instruction, and suggests that more lively materials should be developed for laboratory use. A contextualized approach is suggested, whereby an anecdote, song, essay or poem is used as the basis for a variety of exercises. Calendars upon which important dates are indicated can also be used with accompanying tapes. The paper provides samples from tapes made for adult students of English at the intermediate level, and describes how the tapes can be used to the best advantage. Exercises include repetition drills, question answering, substitution drills, and memorization. There are also exercises geared for developing writing skills. (CLK)

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ENLIVENING THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY

by Jean McConochie

When language laboratories were introduced in the 1950's, they were hailed as an infallible solution to the problem of foreign-language learning. We were regularly reminded that a machine, unlike a teacher, never gets tired of repeating the same phrase over and over, and textbook publishers obliged with tapes of mechanical drills designed to give students intensive practice on a range of grammatical and pronunciation difficulties.

The fallacy, of course, was that while machines don't tire, students do. A classroom teacher can sense his students' fatigue and change activities, but a tape just goes on. The recent disillusion with language laboratories, it seems to me, can be traced directly to the fact that many of the tapes being used simply aren't very good. And, as we all need to remember, a laboratory is no better than the tapes played in it.

So, just as we are moving toward more innovative classroom lessons, so we must make a serious effort to use more lively materials in the language laboratory.

Given the pedagogical quality of most commercially-available tapes, it is evident that a teacher who wants to make the best possible use of a language laboratory will have to make at least some of his or her own tapes. The process is exacting and time-consuming: I count on an average of five hours for writing and recording a tape for a 50-minute lab period. Yet we surely

FL007337

spend as much time developing a really good classroom presentation that we expect to be able to use over and over again.

What can go into, or onto, a teacher-made tape? I would like to suggest a contextualized approach: that is, taking an anecdote, a song, an essay, or even a poem and using it as the basis for a variety of exercises.

I have found a useful context for exploitation in the series of calendars which have appeared in English Teaching Forum.[1] Here is the one for January and February. As you

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see, it features the birthdays of famous Americans and events of national importance. (There are accompanying notes for each calendar in the issue in which it appears.)

The most obvious use of a calendar is for practicing dates. In American English, that involves both the use of ordinal numbers and reading years as a sequence of two two-digit numbers, for example "April tenth, nineteen seventy-four." There is, in addition, the problem of distinguishing between similar-sounding numbers such as "thirteen" and "thirty" or "second" and "seventh." The Forum calendars have the added advantage of presenting information about people and events that are familiar to most Americans.

To illustrate what I mean by "exploiting a context," here are extracts from tape scripts based on the Forum calendars. The tapes were made for adult learners in the intermediate

proficiency range. The samples are offered to give you ideas for your own recording; the tapes themselves are not available for copying.

As the student listens to the tape in the laboratory, he has before him copies of the calendar pages for the months being discussed, as well as a lab sheet with two examples for each exercise. Exercise 1 of the first "Calendar" tape gives the student practice in recognizing ordinal numbers (first, second, third, etc.) and, at the same time, introduces most of the names which will be heard on the tape. Here is the beginning of the tape and the first part of Exercise 1. The confirmation responses, printed here in capital letters, are read by a second voice.

> This is ILE[2] tape number 2 - Calendar. Exercise 1. Ordinal numbers. Look at the calendar page for January and listen to the examples.
>
> Example 1: Who was born on January sixth?
>
> CARL SANDBURG WAS.
>
> Example 2: Who was born on January seventeenth?
>
> BENJAMIN FRANKLIN WAS.
>
> All right. Are you ready? Let's go.
>
> 1. Who was born on January 6th? £[3] CARL SANDBURG WAS. £
> 2. Who was born on January 17th? £ BENJAMIN FRANKLIN WAS. £

As you see, each exercise is preceeded by two examples. These examples are then repeated as the first two items in the exercise.

The second exercise on the tape, which is presented to the student as a "review" of the information just given, requires both recognition and production of ordinal numbers. As with the first exercise, the student needs to look at the calendar page, find the right answer, and then say it. He hears a confirmation response on the tape and has time to repeat it (a four-phase drill).

Here is the end of Exercise 2. You will notice that questions 9 and 10 practice the contrast between 22nd and 27th. The end-of-exercise instructions are for a laboratory where students work with their own copies of the master tape.

> 9. Was John Steinbeck born on February 22nd? £
>
> NO, HE WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 27TH. £
>
> 10. Was Edna St. Vincent Millay born on February 27th? £
>
> NO, SHE WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 22ND.
>
> O.K. That's the end of Exercise 2. Now repeat it until you can answer the questions correctly and without hesitation. Then continue with Exercise 3.

As you see, the student is left the responsibility of deciding when he has mastered the exercise. Most do an exercise twice; some do it three times. The teacher monitoring in the lab can, to some extent, control the amount of repetition, trying to guide each student to the Golden Mean between over-confidence and compulsive correctness.

For the third exercise, years are added to the date reading. For variety, it begins with dates in February. Here is a sample from the middle of Exercise 3.

> 4. Was Langston Hughes born on February 1st? £
> YES, HE WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 1ST, 1902. £
> 5. Was John Steinbeck born on February 27th? £
> YES, HE WAS BORN ON FEBRUARY 27TH, 1902--THE SAME YEAR AS HUGHES. £
> And now for dates in January. £
> 6. Was Benjamin Franklin born on January 17th? £
> YES, HE WAS BORN ON JANUARY 17TH, 1706. £

Exercise 4 on this same tape is much more complicated. The instructions specify only that the questions are about years, But the student also practices converting wh- questions to statements with both active and passive verbs. This exercise also introduces information about events other than birthdays. Here are the first three questions in Exercise 4.

> 1. What year did Alaska become a state? £
> ALASKA BECAME A STATE IN 1959. £
> 2. What year was Edgar Allan Poe born? £
> HE WAS BORN IN 1809. £
> 3. What year was Edison granted a patent on his light bulb? £
> HE WAS GRANTED A PATENT ON HIS LIGHT BULB IN 1880. £

As you have seen, there is a pause for the student to find and give the correct answer, and there is also time for him to repeat the correct answer after hearing it on the tape. When the tapes are being made, the timing of the pause for the student response is done this way: the first speaker gives the stimulus. The second speaker repeats the correct answer to himself, twice, moving his lips, before saying it aloud. For exercises like those presented here, the second speaker must leave a little additional time for the student to look up the correct answer.

The fifth and last exercise for the first "Calendar" tape is based on quotations from Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln and Edna St. Vincent Millay. The format is simple repetition for the importance of the exercise lies in introducing the student to examples of good, literary American English--examples which are quite widely known to native speakers. This last exercise is also a useful "filler": a student who finishes the other exercises quickly can profitably devote as long as ten minutes to Exercise 5, while a student who needs most of a 50-minute laboratory period for the first four exercises can at least read the quotations in Exercise 5 and may have time to do it once.

The student first hears the quotation straight through; the he hears it again and is asked to repeat the words after the speaker. Here is the first of the three, a maxim from Benjamin Franklin.

Early to bed, early to rise
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

Early to bed, £ early to rise £
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise. £

A second "Calendar" tape, for March and April, treats the same kind of information, but with slightly different exercises.

Here is a sample of Exercise 2. In the first part of the exercise, the student hears a person identified by profession and name but needs to recognize only the latter. For example,

What year was the inventor Alexander Graham Bell born? £
HE WAS BORN IN 1847. £

The second part of the exercise, however, is a "quiz" in which the student is asked to fill in the person's profession. on the lab sheet, which looks like this:

QUIZ: Name Profession
1. A. G. Bell _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

This requires that the student rewind his tape and listen

again, this time for different information: the profession, rather than the name. The number of spaces to be filled in acts as a control in guiding the student to the correct answer for each of the seven people to be identified.

Controlled writing exercises, whether a simple one-word fill-in like the professions quiz, or a slotted dictation, or note-taking, or even summary-writing, all are useful as ways to vary laboratory activity. And they may, of course, be used with relatively difficult prose passages. Here, for example, is the beginning of "Calendar 6," a tape for advanced intermediate students.

> (Music: "The Stars and Stripes Forever")
>
> This is Calendar tape number 6: November and December.
>
> Do you recognize the music in the background? It's a march composed by John Philip Sousa, who was born--but you can tell me when he was born by looking at your calendar page for November. Do you find his birthday? That's right. November 6, 1854.
>
> Exercise 1. Your first exercise on this tape is to complete the information in the following paragraph about Sousa. Listen once, then go back and fill in the blanks.

The tape voice goes on to read the passage, while the student fills in his laboratory sheet, which looks like this:

Exercise 1. Slotted dictation.

What was his name? In _____ his luggage was marked Sigismund Ochs. In _____ he called himself Sam Ogden. Both names were used for _____ - _____ purposes to pretend that he was a _____. In the _____ _____ -- and much later all over the _____ world -- he was known as John Philip Sousa. Yet doubt remains that even Sousa was his _____ name. His father was of _____ descent, and rumor had it that the _____ name was So and that _____ but practical papa had added the initials U. S. A. when he began _____ the trombone in the United States _____ Band.

From George Marek, "John Philip Sousa," High Fidelity Magazine, November 1973, p. 57.

The student replays the tape until he can fill in all of the missing words. The exercise could, of course, be made easier by providing individual dashes for each letter in the missing words. An answer key is printed--upside down to discourage premature consultation--at the bottom of the laboratory sheet.

We'll end with that exercise. I hope these samples have given you ideas which you will be able to use in writing and recording your own tape scripts to enliven your students' time in the language laboratory.

Paper originally presented at the IATEFL Conference in Budapest, April, 1974.

Footnotes

[1] The calendars appeared the the following issues of English Teaching Forum, which is published by the United States Information Agency in Washington for overseas distribution:

X, 5 (September-October, 1972) - January/February calendars

X, 6 (November-December, 1972) - March/April

XI, 1 (January-February, 1973) - May/June/July/August

XI, 2 (March-May, 1973) - September/October

XI, 3 (June-August, 1973) - November/December

[2] ILE stands for "Intermediate Listening Exercises."

[3] £ stands for a pause. [The conventional symbol is a cross-hatch, which my typewriter doesn't have.]